

# Responding to a Nuclear Iran

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What should American foreign policy be if current efforts to discourage Iran from developing nuclear weapons fail? Despite the recent resumption of high-level contacts between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the potential for stronger action by the United Nations Security Council, an Iranian nuclear weapon remains a distinct possibility. The current debate regarding US policy toward Iran revolves around the relative merits of a preventive military strike, including the possibility of seeking regime change in Tehran, versus a policy that focuses on diplomacy and economic sanctions to dissuade Iran from pursuing a nuclear bomb. This debate, however, risks prematurely foreclosing discussions regarding a wide-range of foreign policy options should diplomacy and sanctions fail to persuade Tehran to limit its nuclear ambitions.

The choices America would face if Iran developed nuclear weapons are not simply between preventive military action and doing nothing. The calculations America would face are not between the costs of action versus the costs of inaction. A nuclear-armed Iran will certainly pose a number of challenges for the United States. Those challenges, however, can be met through an active policy of deterrence, containment, engagement, and the reassurance of America's allies in the region.

## *American Interests*

The United States has three strategic interests in the Persian Gulf: maintaining the flow of oil onto world markets, preventing any hostile state from dominating the region, and minimizing any terrorist threat. Given these interests, the challenges posed by a nuclear-armed Iran need to be addressed by a policy that minimizes the threat to key oil production and transportation infrastructure and negates any Iranian bid for regional hegemony. Addi-

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tionally, any action taken toward Iran has to be weighed against the potential impact it may have with regard to the global war on terrorism and ongoing US initiatives related to nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, such a policy needs to be executed in a manner that avoids any nuclear threat to the United States or its allies.

The end-state the United States should be working toward, as a result of these strategic interests, is an Iran that is an integral part of the global economy, at peace with its neighbors, and not supportive of terrorist organizations. While America's strategic interests do not include the proliferation of democracy, any acceptable end-state will likely require some measure of democratic reform. Given the fact that anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism are an integral part of the Islamic Republic's identity, some measure of regime evolution will be required in an effort to advance America's long-term interests.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Perils of a Preventive Strike***

Any attempt to disarm Iran through the use of military options would in all likelihood damage America's interests in the region. While a military option might inflict significant damage on Iran's infrastructure by damaging or destroying its nuclear weapons program, disrupting its regional ambitions, and possibly serving as a deterrent to future proliferators, the likely costs would far outweigh the benefits.

First, any military action against Iran would send seismic shocks through global energy markets at a time when the price of oil is already at record highs. Since Iran relies heavily on the income derived from oil exports, it is unlikely that it would withhold petroleum from global markets. Iran may, however, threaten to disrupt the flow of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz or sponsor attacks on key oil infrastructure on the territory of America's Gulf allies. Such actions could hurt the US economy and potentially bolster Iranian revenue by raising the price of oil. While it is true that the world market would eventually adjust to such actions, as James Fallows has noted, that is a bit like saying eventually the US stock market adjusted to the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup>

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Any direct military action against Iran could also have a significant impact on America’s war on terrorism. Such action would only serve to confirm many of Osama bin Laden’s statements that the United States is at war with the world of Islam. This charge would be difficult to counter, given the fact that the United States has looked the other way for years with regard to Israel’s nuclear program, accepted India as a legitimate nuclear-state, and is negotiating with North Korea regarding its nuclear ambitions.

Any military action against Iran would also undermine America’s nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, due to possible Iranian retaliation in both countries. While Iranian efforts toward stabilizing these two states have been sporadic at best, and purposively obstructive at worst, there is little reason to doubt that Iran could make achieving US objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan far more difficult. Although mostly bluster, there is some truth to former Iranian President Ali Rafsanjani’s argument that as long as American troops maintain a formidable presence on Iran’s borders, “it is the United States that is besieged by Iran.”<sup>3</sup> The same holds true regarding Iran’s ties to Hezbollah and its presence in Lebanon. By targeting Iran’s nuclear program the United States would unwisely encourage Iranian escalation in a number of these arenas.

Military strikes against Tehran would also undermine Washington’s long-term goal of seeing reform movements succeed in Iran. If the history of military incursions and the Iranian nation teach us anything it is the fact that intervention is likely to solidify support for the current regime. The idea that the Iranian people would react to a military strike by advocating the overthrow of the existing regime is delusional.<sup>4</sup> Instead the likely outcome of any direct military incursion would be the bolstering of the current regime.

Moreover, any preventive attack, no matter how effective, is only a temporary fix. First, such a campaign will eliminate only that portion of Iran’s nuclear program known to intelligence agencies. Even after the extensive bombing campaign of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, subsequent in-

spections discovered large parts of Iraq's unconventional weapons programs that were previously unknown. More importantly, even if such an attack succeeded in eliminating significant facets of Iran's nuclear program, it would do little toward discouraging Iran from rebuilding those assets. Thus, even after a fully successful denial campaign, the United States, in a number of years, would likely face the prospect of having to do it all over again.

### ***The Problem with Regime Change***

Given the limits of any preventive strike, perhaps the United States should not restrict its goal in Iran to simply nuclear disarmament, but opt instead for the broader objective of regime change. If successful, regime change in Iran could provide for a number of benefits. It may eliminate the Iranian threat of interrupting the flow of oil from the region; it would also send a strong message to potential proliferators about the costs of similar actions; it might diminish Iran's support for terrorism; even possibly eliminate the threat of official Iranian meddling in Iraq and Afghanistan; and could potentially curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The reason a policy advocating regime change is a bad idea, given its potential benefits, is the fact that such a policy is beyond America's means. While the United States certainly possesses the capability to eliminate the regime in Tehran, as the invasion of Iraq has shown, eliminating the present leadership is the easy part of regime change. The more difficult and costly challenge is installing a new government. With America's resources already overly committed in Afghanistan and Iraq, taking on a new nation-building mission in a country far larger and in some ways far more nationalistic than Iraq would be the epitome of strategic overreach.

Additionally, one of the few scenarios where Iran might use its nuclear capability would be if Tehran believed that the United States intended to exercise forcible regime change. A nuclear strike against any American presence in the region might be seen by the leadership in Tehran as its last hope for survival. It goes without saying that once any government has crossed the nuclear threshold, forcible regime change by an external actor is no longer a viable option. The threat of nuclear retaliation would simply be too great. Indeed, this is probably the most important reason why states such as Iran and North Korea desire nuclear weapons. Does this mean that the United States should therefore seek regime change before Iran develops its nuclear capability? No; even without nuclear weapons, forcible regime change in Iran and the ensuing occupation would entail too great a commitment of resources on the part of the United States. Pursuing regime change in Iran as a response to

its nuclear program would be akin to treating a brain tumor with a guillotine. The proposed cure is worse than the disease.

### ***A Better Policy: Deter, Contain, and Engage***

Fortunately, US policy options for dealing with a nuclear Iran are not limited to preventive military strikes, regime change, or doing nothing. A more promising option would have four key components. First, deter Iran from ever using its nuclear weapons. Second, prevent Iran from using its nuclear status to increase its influence in the region. Third, engage Iran in a meaningful way that encourages the creation of a government friendly to the United States and its regional allies, one that does not sponsor terrorism. Finally, such a policy should reassure US allies in the region that America's commitment to their security is steadfast. This four-pronged strategy would do a better job of protecting American interests in the region than any military strike or forcible regime change.

#### *Deter*

America's overriding concern regarding Iran's nuclear weapons program is that these weapons are never used against the United States or its allies. Fortunately, the strategy of nuclear deterrence can go a long way in resolving this problem. The threat of annihilation as the result of an American retaliatory strike can be a powerful deterrent. As the United States and the Soviet Union discovered during the Cold War and as India and Pakistan have recently learned, the threat of nuclear retaliation makes the use of such weapons problematic.

The central question in any debate over America's policies toward a nuclear Iran is whether or not the regime in Tehran is deterrable. If in fact it is, then deterrence is a less costly and risky strategy than prevention. Proponents of the preventive use of military force argue, as did the alarmists in the late 1940s with regard to the Soviet Union and in the early 1960s about China, that Iran is a revolutionary state seeking to export its destabilizing ideology. For these analysts Iran is often depicted as a regime of religious zealots that cannot be deterred because they are willing to accept an apocalyptic end to any conflict.<sup>5</sup>

While Iran's track record with regard to its foreign policy does indicate a regime that is hostile to America, nothing would indicate that Iran is beyond the realm of nuclear deterrence. The bulk of the revolutionary fervor demonstrated by the Islamic Republic during its infancy died during the long war with Iraq. Moreover, the power of nuclear deterrence lies in the fact that precise calculations and cost and benefit analyses are not needed given the overwhelming costs associated with any nuclear exchange. Iranian leaders are rational enough to un-

derstand that any use of nuclear weapons against the United States or its allies would result in an overwhelming and unacceptable response.

What about President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad talking of wiping Israel off the map or the former President Rafsanjani declaring that while Israel could not survive a nuclear war, the Islamic world could survive a nuclear exchange? Fears related to such rhetoric need to be viewed in a historical context. Similar arguments were made about the Soviets and Chinese as they developed their nuclear arsenals. The fear of many Cold War hawks was that the Kremlin was run by ideologues. Wasn't it a fact that they did not shirk while watching 25 million of their own killed in World War II; nor did they flinch while millions more were murdered in internal purges? This demonstrated, many argued, that the Soviet leadership would be impervious to the logic of mutually assured destruction. Indeed, at times Mao Tse-Tung offered strikingly similar rhetoric to that coming out of Tehran today. He also boasted about how China could afford to lose millions in a nuclear exchange and still emerge victorious.<sup>6</sup> Such worries turned out to be baseless with regard to the Soviets and the Chinese, and such rhetoric proved to be just that, rhetoric. While the bizarre views and hostile statements coming from Iran's current President are cause for concern, one must also be cognizant of the fact that the President of Iran is not the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and, in reality, has little influence over the nuclear program. The Supreme Leader does, however, and Ayatollah Ali Khameni has distanced himself from the most bellicose of Ahmadinejad's rhetoric.

To counter these ominous tirades one could look to more reassuring statements, such as Supreme Leader Khameni's argument that nuclear weapons are un-Islamic.<sup>7</sup> More enlightening, however, than comparing dueling quotes, is an examination of what Iran has done in terms of its foreign policy. Iran has shown itself to be pragmatic in its actions to protect national interests, foregoing the activities one associates with a religiously driven revolutionary state.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, contrary to expectations, Iran did not seek to export its revolution to parts of the former Soviet Union, understanding that their national interest lay in forging a solid and profitable relationship with Russia. Iran even went so far as to dismiss the war in Chechnya as an internal Russian matter. Similar calculations of national interests led Iran to support Christian Armenia over Muslim Azerbaijan. Following the 1991 Gulf War, Iran did not push for a Shia revolution in Iraq, fearing that the outcome would probably be too dangerous and destabilizing. Following its isolation during the Iran-Iraq War Iran worked vigorously to improve relations with its Gulf neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

But does Tehran's antipathy toward the United States and Israel outweigh its long-term national interests? No; indeed, during the Iran-Iraq War Tehran was willing to engage in arms shipments with the United States and Israel in an effort to further its war against Iraq. Given the difficulties the Iranians had with the Taliban, Tehran has also been fairly supportive of the American intervention in Afghanistan, to include offering the United States the use of its airfields and ports.<sup>9</sup> While Tehran was less supportive of America's subsequent intervention in Iraq, the leadership was astute enough to recognize the benefits associated with the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime. The point of these examples is not to discount any policy differences that Washington has with Tehran, but to stress that Iran is not run by ideologues, rather by a group of pragmatists devoted to protecting Iranian interests. Leaders who are rational enough to understand that the use of nuclear weapons against America would not be in their national interests.

There has also been a good deal of international media reports related to the fear that Iran might provide nuclear weapons to terrorist organizations. Ironically, the very use by Iran of surrogate terrorist organizations, rather than more overt attacks, is evidence that Tehran is sensitive to the calculations associated with the strategy of deterrence. It is also an affirmation that the Iranian leadership is attempting to minimize the risks to its foreign policy objectives. Such acts argue strongly against any possibility that Iran might provide terrorist organizations with nuclear weapons. Any move of this nature carries with it a great amount of risk; Iranians would lose control over the employment of the weapons while still having to worry that they might be blamed and targeted for response.<sup>10</sup>

### *Contain*

The second pillar of US strategy toward a nuclear Iran should be a policy of containment, to be certain that Iran does not succeed in exercising its nuclear capability as a tool of coercive diplomacy against US or allied interests in the region. Given Iran's perception of itself as the historically pre-eminent power in the region, Tehran can be expected to continue its policy attempting to increase its regional influence at the expense of the United States.

How would the possession of a deliverable nuclear weapon impact Tehran's foreign policy agenda? One possibility is that a nuclear Iran might be more, rather than less, restrained in its regional agenda. If any of Iran's actions are driven by a sense of insecurity with regard to America's intentions (or the threat created by a nuclear Pakistan or Israel, even the possibility of a resurgent Iraq), the security that Tehran would gain from having its own nuclear deterrent could make the nation's leadership less worried about the regional balance of

power. Moreover, possession of a nuclear weapon would certainly increase the attention other world-powers paid Iran. The leadership in Tehran would have to continually worry that if any crisis developed involving another nuclear power the potential foe might opt for a preemptive attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. The fear that even a limited conflict might escalate into a nuclear exchange could make Tehran more cautious across the entire spectrum of conflict.

While such pressures may play a limited role in Iran's decision-making, it would be unwise for the United States to put too much faith in such possibilities. First, Iran's regional behavior is only partially driven by security fears. Even if Iran believed there was no threat from the United States, its status as a potential regional hegemon gives it incentive to increase its role in regional affairs. Second, while a limited amount of learning related to nuclear crisis management did take place during the Cold War, it took the United States and the Soviets a number of crises to fully appreciate these lessons.<sup>11</sup> Although the existence of this Cold War record might enable Iran to learn such lessons more quickly, the limits of vicarious learning offer ample reasons to doubt that Iran will internalize these dictums without experiencing similar crises.

The result is that Iran can probably be expected to continue furthering its regional agenda in an attempt to increase its stature and diminish that of the United States. At least initially, any increased nuclear capability will likely embolden rather than induce caution on the part of Iran's leadership. Having gone to great lengths and paid significant costs to develop its nuclear capabilities, Iran is likely to continue testing the regional and international waters. Such efforts are bound to create challenges for the United States and its allies. The good news is that nuclear weapons have proven to be poor tools for coercive diplomacy, especially against states that already possess nuclear weapons or who may be allied with a nuclear power. Nuclear weapons have proven to be extraordinarily effective at two tasks: deterring the use of such weapons against other nuclear powers or their allies, and deterring states from directly challenging the vital interests of a nuclear power. Beyond these two critical tasks, however, nuclear weapons have not proven particularly useful as diplomatic tools of intimidation. For the United States and its allies, a policy of containment against Iranian attempts to expand its influence in the region is the correct foreign policy strategy. Certainly, such a strategy far outweighs any policy based on preventive war.

### *Engage*

To advance America's long-range goal of an Iran that is part of the global economy, at peace with its neighbors, and not supporting terrorism, Washington would be better served by engaging Iran rather than attempting to isolate it. A policy of engagement could take two forms: the establishment of

direct diplomatic relations and the encouragement of Iran's involvement in the global economy.

The United States broke diplomatic ties with Iran in April 1980, during the hostage crisis. The establishment of direct diplomatic ties between the United States and Iran, however, should not be seen as any form of a reward to Iran or as approval of Iranian policies. Nor should the reestablishment of formal relations be seen as the final stage in some sort of grand bargain. Instead, diplomatic relations should be viewed as part of the normal business of conducting America's foreign policy. There is little reason to doubt that Iran would portray any US initiative to reestablish diplomatic relations as a victory, as Tehran did with the recent moves by the Bush Administration to engage in direct talks related to the situation in Iraq. America should not let fear of such a reaction stand in the way of any initiative that would advance America's long-term security interests.

Over the years the United States has found that it needs diplomatic relations with hostile states as well as with allies. Such relationships were maintained throughout the Cold War with the Soviet Union, despite numerous crises and conflicts. In the case of Iran the absence of direct governmental links makes it more difficult to deter and contain Iran. Obviously, Iran would have to concur in the reestablishment of any form of diplomatic relations.

Given the number of domestic challenges the Islamic Republic is facing, most notably a tremendous growth in its youthful population, combined with the incompetence and corruption that has marked its stewardship of the Iranian economy, it is hard to imagine that this regime can continue to avoid collapse without significant reform.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, there is little reason to expect that a democratic revolution is imminent. The reform movements that seemed so promising in the late 1990s have largely been defeated. The best strategy for revitalizing these movements is to encourage Tehran's involvement in the world economy, as opposed to further attempts at isolation. Increasing the Iranian people's exposure to the world economy is much more likely to increase motivation and expand the resources available to any future reform movement. Iran's eventual inclusion in the World Trade Organization is one of the carrots currently being held out to Iran as part of ongoing negotiations regarding its nuclear program. Such incentives may advance America's long-term foreign policy goals in the region even if those efforts fail to negate Iran's development of a nuclear weapon.

Potential economic sanctions against Iran related to its nuclear program need to be carefully addressed. Iran's stagnant economy, as well as its reliance on the international energy market, make it acutely vulnerable to economic sanctions.<sup>13</sup> While the threat of sanctions may be useful in dissuading the development of nuclear weapons, it is less clear that the actual imposi-

tion of sanctions would advance US foreign policy interests. While economic sanctions might extract a high toll on the Iranian economy, the reality is that the political effect that accompanies such sanctions often strengthens, rather than undermines, a regime. Sanctions tend to increase a government's control over the country's economic activity, thereby starving potential opponents of resources. Sanctions can also create a "rally round the flag" effect that permits a regime to blame international hostility for the state's internal weaknesses.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of a nuclear Iran, sanctions are only likely to be useful under a fairly stringent set of circumstances. To significantly impact Iran's economy, any sanctions regime would have to be multilateral and include at a minimum the United States, European Union, Russia, and China. Sanctions would also have to be properly targeted against the leadership of the current regime and not structured in such a manner as to inflict indiscriminate damage to Iran's economy. Finally, penalties inflicted by the sanctions need be directly attributable to the regime's development of nuclear weapons.

Creating sanctions that meet these requirements would not be easy. The importance of Iran as a market for Russia and an energy supplier to China makes any sanctions regime a tough sell in Moscow and Beijing. The complicated and often opaque nature of Iranian domestic politics also presents a challenge to the development of "smart sanctions." Finally, given the distrust that exists in Iran regarding the history of external interventions, it is doubtful that any sanctions regime would be interpreted as anything except another attempt to interfere in internal politics. In all likelihood, the United States would be better off by not making sanctions the focal point for its policies regarding a nuclear Iran. Engagement has often proven to be a surer path to regime evolution than economic isolation.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Reassure Iran's Neighbors***

The final portion of a US strategy toward a nuclear-armed Iran should focus on convincing Iran's neighbors that the American commitment to their security remains strong. If the United States wants regional powers to resist Iranian attempts at expanding its influence, then Washington needs to bolster security ties in the region. Improving security cooperation with Iran's neighbors could advance a number of American interests beyond simple containment. Such efforts could also help increase the security of the oil infrastructure in the region, as well as expand intelligence cooperation related to international terrorism.

A more definite US security commitment to Iran's neighbors may also decrease the chance that the development of a nuclear weapon would increase the threat of nuclear proliferation in the region. Egypt, Turkey, and

Saudi Arabia have been cited as states likely to respond to any Iranian nuclear capability with increased nuclear programs. Egypt, however, has been able to tolerate a nuclear Israel for more than 30 years, as well as accommodate Libya's weapons programs. Given that historical precedent, it is unlikely that an Iranian bomb would dramatically change Cairo's calculations. Similarly, Turkey's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its desire to join the European Union are likely to dissuade Ankara from attempting to join the nuclear fraternity. Saudi Arabia and the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, however, would more than likely attempt to strengthen security ties with the United States in an effort to bolster their position against a nuclear Iran.

Part of America's strategy regarding regional allies needs to focus on assuring individual states that as long as Iran is contained, the United States will not take any preventive military action. While the Gulf States certainly would prefer that Iran not develop nuclear weapons, it is also important to recognize that they fear any US-Iranian conflict more than they fear the prospect of a nuclear Iran.<sup>16</sup> America's most promising strategy toward a nuclear-armed Iran should be the development of a security architecture based on deterrence and containment.

### ***Conclusion***

The United States should be under no illusions regarding the problems that a nuclear-armed Iran would present. The challenges that development would pose for American interests in the region would be monumental and lasting. The strategy of deterrence, containment, engagement, and reassurance provides the framework for achieving America's long-term regional objectives. Such a strategy would minimize disruptions to the international flow of oil, blunt Iran's attempts at regional hegemony, stabilize US efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and aid in countering the global war on terrorism. Ultimately, it will provide the time that reformers in Iran need to recast the Iranian government from within. It is this reformation of Iran's government that will offer the best guarantee for preserving America's interests in the region.

When US diplomat George Kennan proposed the doctrine of containment against the Soviet Union at the outset of the Cold War, he argued that Soviet diplomacy was:

At once easier and more difficult to deal with than the diplomacy of aggressive leaders like Napoleon and Hitler. On the one hand it is more sensitive to contrary force, more ready to yield on individual sectors of the diplomatic front when that force was felt to be too strong, and thus more rational in the logic and

rhetoric of power. On the other hand it cannot be easily defeated or discouraged by a single victory on the part of its opponents. . . . [I]t can be effectively countered not by sporadic acts which represent the momentary whims of democratic opinion, but only by intelligent long-range policies.<sup>17</sup>

Admittedly, the Iran of today is quite different than the Soviet Union of the 1940s. It represents what is at best a regional rather than a global challenge, and its distinctive Persian and Shia ideologies are likely to have limited appeal abroad. These differences aside, Kennan's insight still applies. Iranian nuclear ambitions can best be deterred by means of an intelligent long-range foreign policy, not the threat of military intervention.

#### NOTES

1. On regime evolution versus regime change, see Richard N. Haass, "Regime Change and Its Limits," *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (July/August 2005), 68.

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3. Quoted in Kamram Taremi, "Iranian Foreign Policy Towards Occupied Iraq, 2003-2005," *Middle East Policy*, 12 (Winter 2005), 42.

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7. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 237; and Michael Eisenstadt, "Deter and Contain: Dealing with a Nuclear Iran" in Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson, eds., *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, October 2005), 227-29.

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10. For a discussion of the issues involved in deterring states from supplying nuclear weapons to terrorists, see Caitlin Talmadge, "Deterring a Nuclear 9/11," *Washington Quarterly*, 30 (Spring 2007), 21-34.

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12. Ray Takeyh and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Pragmatism in the Midst of Iranian Turmoil," *Washington Quarterly*, 27 (Autumn 2004), 33-56; Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, "The Conservative Consolidation in Iran," *Survival*, 47 (Summer 2005), 175-90; and Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Theocracy under Siege," *Middle East Policy*, 10 (Spring 2003), 135-52.

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14. See, for example, Meghan L. O'Sullivan, *Shrewd Sanctions: Statecraft and State Sponsors of Terrorism* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), especially 284-320.

15. Haass, 71.

16. Judith S. Yaphe and Charles D. Lutes, *Reassessing the Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran* (Washington: National Defense Univ., Institute for National Strategic Studies, McNair Paper #69, August 2005), 19.

17. X [George Kennan], "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 (July 1947), 575.